

Children with multiple stays at refuges for abused women and their experiences of teacher recognition

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Abstract Numerous children around the world are forced to make multiple moves with their mothers in and out of refuges for abused women. Each time, they experience a sudden upheaval of their familiar environment. For these children, domestic violence and flight from violence is not an isolated event but part of their upbringing. Few statistics and little research exist on their living conditions and experiences. This article adopts the children’s perspective, examining the ways their teachers recognize their situation and offer them support. Experiences were collected in qualitative interviews with 20 children of ages 6–16 residing at Norwegian refuges. The choice of “mutual recognition” (Schibbye 2009) as a theoretical framework was inductively generated from the data. The constructivist grounded theory coding system was implemented as a data analysis method (Charmaz 2014). The analysis produced five different forms of teacher recognition—formal, practical, third-party, forced, and coincidental—through which teachers offered children various forms of support.

Keywords Recognition · Domestic violence · School · Teacher · Children

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Introduction

Many children seek protection with their mothers at refuges for abused women, which provide them with a safe place to stay for a period of time. For some children, however, the violence does not end after their first refuge stay and they must seek protection repeatedly throughout their childhood. Frequently, the relocations disrupt their education. Children in a study conducted in the USA by Chanmugam (2009) attended from 4 to 18 different schools in their lifetimes as a result of repeated refuge stays.

Although knowledge about the life situations of children with multiple refuge stays is limited, research has shown that these children fear being stalked by their abuser, that they are fearful when they move schools, that some are ambivalent about schooling and their futures, and a few are notably more sensitive about their privacy (e.g., Øverlien et al. 2009; Chanmugam 2009; Hogan and O'Reilly 2007; Buckley et al. 2007; Stafford et al. 2008; Mullender et al. 2002). Changing schools, or returning to a school after moving away, poses a number of challenges, including knowledge gaps, missed instruction, and interrupted social relationships (Chanmugam et al. 2015). These children share three unique life experiences which may have serious life consequences: long and repeated exposure to domestic violence, repeated disruption of close relationships, and disruption of preschool and school attendance. As a result, these children may have a higher risk of developing social and psychological difficulties, and a high risk of failing or dropping out of school (Selvik and Øverlien 2014).

Educational disruption can lead to overload for even the most capable pupils, as they risk losing supportive relationships with both staff and peers (Sterne et al. 2010; Mullender et al. 2002). The fact that school change may be abrupt and unprepared also increases its negative impact on the child (Øverlien 2012). Hence, a positive relationship with their teacher may become a particularly important source of support, as the teacher may be one of only a few non-parent adults in their lives whom they meet on a daily basis (Øverlien 2015; McColl 2005; Mullender 2004). Teachers may also be better equipped than other adults to understand children and their life worlds, and thus more likely to recognize when a child is struggling with experiences of domestic violence (Øverlien 2015; Sterne et al. 2010). In Norway, it is mandatory for teachers to notify and report all forms of child abuse and neglect to child protection services (Øverlien 2015).

The teacher's role in relationships with children who have experienced domestic violence has increasingly been a focus of research, politics, and teacher education (Øverlien 2015; Chanmugam and Teasley 2014; Ollis 2014; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2013; Justice-and Emergency Affairs Department 2013; Alistic 2012; Hughes 2012; Sterne et al. 2010). In Norway, a new study by Øverlien and Holen Moen (2016) showed that although students teachers in recent years have received more education in this area, the majority still considered it insufficient and desired a clearer focus on issues related to this topic in their educational program. This presents a dilemma, as the guidelines on crisis management of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training clearly require teachers to report, accommodate, and follow up on children who experience domestic violence (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2013). In addition, although all pupils are entitled to free health services provided by a school nurse to promote their health and wellbeing, in practice this service is limited because of cuts in school nurse staffing in a number of Norwegian counties (Norges offentlige utredning 2003). Similarly, a survey by Buland et al. (2011) found that funding for school counsellors has been reduced, so not all schools have a counsellor.

Teachers in studies from across nations report that they lack necessary knowledge and skills to work with children exposed to domestic violence (Gudmundsen 2014; Aarhus 2013; Idsøe 2013; McKee and Holt 2012; Alisic et al. 2012; Byrne and Taylor 2007). Corresponding findings from the child's perspective have appeared in a number of studies (Øverlien 2015; Berg 2013; Stanley et al. 2012; Buckley et al 2007; Almqvist and Broberg 2004). An American study by Young et al. (2008), which evaluated the effects of a domestic violence training program for professional educators, found teachers were insufficiently familiar with school safety policies and procedures. Some studies also show that teachers express uncertainty about their role in interacting with children who live with domestic violence or at abused women refuges, which may be one reason they are reluctant to address the violence and inform authorities (Wang 2014; Alistic 2012; McKee 2009).

No statistics are available on schooling and school experiences for children living at refuges in Norway. We do not know what schooling alternatives, if any, are provided, nor what type of help teachers provide. Using interviews with children who have made multiple stays in refuges, this paper explores their experiences of teacher support, aiming to answer the following questions: What characterizes the relationship between children with multiple refuge stays and their teachers? What kind of support do teachers provide?

Teacher recognition

Acts of recognition pervade many aspects of everyday life. Our perceptions of identity, self-worth, and self-esteem depend fundamentally on what feedback we receive and how it is provided, from other individuals or from society as a whole (Honneth 2005; Markell 2003).

Recognition is often associated with positive attention: praise, reward for achievements, or agreement and positive confirmation (Bae 2012; Møller 2012; Schibbye 2009). However, the concept of recognition is wider. It implies the ability to perceive things based on the subjective experiences of other people (Hegel and Wood 1991; Schibbye 2009). In Schibbye's (1996, 2002, 2003, 2009) dialectical understanding of relations, the concept of mutual recognition is central. Mutual recognition includes the ability to shift from our own perspective to that of the other and to confirm the other's right to his/her experience, values, and feelings. Self-reflexivity is defined as the ability to have thoughts about our own thoughts, to be aware of our feelings, values, and assessments, and to differentiate between what goes on inside our self and the other's self. Without a self-reflexive attitude, we risk taking our own perspective for granted, making us unable to adopt the perspective of another. Although this concept was developed in the field of psychotherapy, as Bae (2012) has argued, it is also applicable to the interaction between teachers and children, because it emphasizes the equal worth of partners, regardless of age and position, and highlights the way partners mutually create the conditions for one another's reactions.

Schibbye (2009) operationalizes the concept of mutual recognition through four intertwined elements that simultaneously precondition one another: listening, understanding, acceptance and tolerance, and confirmation. According to Schibbye, to listen is more than just hearing words; it is hearing without preconceived ideas and objections. For a teacher, this means being emotionally available and showing interest in and openness to a child's experience. Such listening makes the child feel important, appreciated, and truthful. Therapeutic understanding is internal and not just external. Through external understanding, the teacher shows sympathy, cognitive recognition, and acceptance. Doing so is especially supportive when the child is in a

situation of great insecurity, inner chaos, and confusion. Internal understanding implies the teacher's capacity to share his/her feelings and experiences with the child; it requires an ability to express empathy and compassion for the child's internal state, wishes, and feelings. Within a vast discourse in the literature about what constitutes empathy (eg. Swan and Riley 2012; Davis 1996; Hoffman 1982), and in line with Rogers (1951), Fonagy et al. (1991) and Fonagy and Target (1996), Schibbye perceives empathy to be the ability to reflect on one's own mental state, beliefs and feelings when understanding others' and the capacity to sense the inner world and feelings of others as if they were one's own. This is crucial for the child, to develop tools for internal appraisal and the ability to self-acknowledge and understand his/her experiences. To accept and tolerate is to acknowledge that the other's experiences and perspectives without judgment, criticism, or correction. This requires teachers to differentiate between their internal experiences and feelings and those of the child, and to acknowledge the child's as equally valid. Confirming implies that the teacher is focused and present in the interaction and can respond adequately to the child's experiences and expressions (Møller 2012; Schibbye 2009).

Parents play a crucial part in providing recognition and support. However, parents experiencing domestic violence, in the face of their own overwhelming problems, may begin to concentrate on their own feelings and reactions and become less sensitive to their children's needs (Bancroft et al. 2011; Frederick and Goddar 2010). Research shows that children who experience domestic violence are at increased risk of other forms of abuse and neglect, such as emotional violence (Finkelhore et al. 2015). If parents cannot provide the necessary recognition and support, the teacher may become a "key adult." Therefore, how teachers react and what they do or refrain from doing is particularly important in their encounters with these children.

Method

Given the paucity of research on children with multiple refugee stays in general, and their school experiences in particular, we set out to interview children with multiple refugee stays. We focused on their school and refugee experiences, rather than their experiences of domestic violence. In order to conduct research that allowed our subjects' views and perspectives to be ascertained, we approached our data with inductive analyzing method Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory. Grounded theory aims to develop theories from research grounded in data, rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories. However, in this research, this approach served to guide our choice of theory generated from the data. In other words, we did not approach the data with the existing theories; we rather approached the data to guide our choice of theories. This allowed for closeness to the data and provided the possibility to learn about a phenomenon in-depth through empirical investigation from the perspective of the participants (Creswell 2013; Charmaz 2006, 2014).

Ethical concerns

Following researchers in the sociology of childhood/childhood studies (Hutchby 2005; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998; James et al. 1998), we argue that children should be taken seriously as social agents and as active constructors of their own social worlds, and

as such, should be treated as competent informants and experts on their own lives. However, the recognition of children as “social actors” has created a field with new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities for researchers (Cater and Øverlien 2013). The ethical dimensions of this project therefore received considerable attention. The study followed the ethical principles recommended for the social sciences in Norway and has been subjected to standard ethical investigations by The Data Inspectorate in Norway. Concerns regarding confidentiality, consent, and the child’s wellbeing were central. To ensure confidentiality, data were collected from several refuges and personal information of participants was omitted. The mother’s written consent together with the child’s oral consent was obtained. Since mothers and children come to refuges in secrecy and without the knowledge of husbands/fathers, consent from the father was not required. During the interview session, the child was reminded of the focus of the interview and his/her nonverbal language was evaluated, to avoid over-disclosure and ensure ongoing consent (Schelbe et al. 2015).

Participants

Participants were children aged 6–16 with at least one previous stay at a refuge for abused women. During the period 2013–2014, a total of 20 children, 7 boys and 13 girls, were recruited through five refuges in different cities in Norway. The majority of the participants (16) had an Asian background; 2 were of Nordic origin and 2 from European countries outside Norway. During the fieldwork, 5 potential interview candidates were excluded from the study for ethical reasons (emotional condition of the child, safety, and willingness to participate).

Data gathering

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews which allowed for comparability between interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). As the age span of the children was broad, three interview guides were developed, one for each age group (4–6, 7–12, and 13–18 years). The interviewer was sensitive to the spectrum of needs for children of different ages and developmental stages. The youngest children, for example, needed more breaks and opportunities to draw and play during the interview. At the beginning of each interview, children were asked to draw a map showing their refuge moves, their schools, and the people they spoke to about their refuge stays. To make the interview session interactive and co-productive rather than purely guided (Solberg 2014), this map was used as the basis for the interview and made the conversation as concrete as possible. Although the aim was to obtain interviews that put the child in focus and the interviewer in the position of listener rather than interrogator (Hydén 2014), we acknowledge that with some of the children, the interviews tended to take a “question-answer” form, perhaps as a result of the children’s limited experience in verbalizing their thoughts about their refuges and schools. At the time of their interviews, children were living in safe circumstances away from the abuser. Most of the interviews were conducted on refuge premises. Four children were interviewed at school or in their new homes, for practical reasons. Interview length varied from 30 to 45 min. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were piloted and data from the three pilot interviews were included in the study. All interviews were carried out by the first author, except for three conducted by the third author.

Analyses

Data were analyzed in line with grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006, 2014). Codes were organized with NVIVO 11, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program. The data was line-by-line coded in the form of short labels/naming segments. Frequent and significant initial codes were sorted and organized under focused codes. Memos were developed from significant and frequent codes to answer questions such as How do children comprehend teacher acknowledgment of their situation? What do they notice of teacher efforts to support them? Through subsequent memoing, the concept of recognition emerged from the data. Five types of teacher recognition were described by the children: formal recognition, practical recognition, third-person recognition, forced recognition, and coincidental recognition. To complete the last level of coding (theoretical coding) in grounded theory would have required a larger sample group than the one in this study.

Findings

The children in this study had, over a short or long period of their childhood, experienced between 2 and 7 stays at the same or different refuges. They experienced these multiple moves, whether between home and refuge or between different refuges, as being constantly on the run. They described the moves as tiring, abrupt, and frightening. Some had been more or less confined to refuges for security reasons; others were forced to relocate to a different city; in a few extreme cases, children had to change identity and live undercover, with police assistance. Moves occurred at random times during the school year and resulted in both school absence and change of schools. Absence could vary from a few days to weeks or months, depending on the complexity of the child's situation and security measures. During school absences, none of the informants had contact with their teacher or friends and only three had access to distance education at the refuge.

The following findings treat children's interviews both as descriptions of their experiences (inner states of mind) and as factual accounts of the state of affairs in schools. Below, we describe the kinds of recognition children in this study perceived from their teachers, and what support they received from teachers and other adults at school. The data show that informants experienced more than one kind of teacher recognition as a result of changing teachers, at the same or different schools.

Formal recognition

Formal recognition consisted of acknowledgement by a teacher in one-on-one conversation. Nina's story provides an example. Nina (age 11) had made 7 refuge stays and experienced long school absences over a 3-year period of continuous flight from domestic violence. She was able to attend school during three of the refuge stays, in different cities. Periods of schooling began and ended abruptly, lasting a few months each. For Nina, changing schools was "...kind of tough...because it was a totally new place and I didn't know anything...." Asked whether her teacher at her third school, during her fifth refuge stay, knew about her situation, she said:

Excerpt 1:

Nina: eh...eh..yeah..when I had a conference with my [school 2] teacher, he definitely knew, he asked me about how things were and such..yeah

Interviewer:...how did it feel to talk to him about it?

Nina: It was okay!..yeah

Interviewer: Could it [the talk] have been better in any way?

Nina: No...It was like...just fine...

Interviewer:...did you think talking with him helped?

Nina: ehh...maybe a little!

Interviewer: How?

Nina: ehh..I could let out my feelings...yeah

Interviewer: Do you mind saying what kind of feelings?

Nina: The knot in my stomach!

Norwegian schools usually schedule teacher-pupil conferences such as these at intervals throughout the academic year. The conferences focus on the pupil's academic development and educational needs. Pupils may also talk about their non-academic development (Elevorganisasjon 2012). Since Nina's teacher acknowledged her situation during a formal teacher-pupil conference, it may have offered a familiar, confidential, and safe environment for both of them. Following Schibbye (2009), we can say that Nina's teacher created mutual conditions for dialogue by speaking openly and confidently about his knowledge of her situation. His approach indicated interest in and openness to her experiences. This created the conditions for Nina's reaction: feeling safe enough to reveal some of the feelings she had been holding inside. These feelings seemed to be important blockages in Nina's learning and participation in class, as seen in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 2:

Nina: I talked better with the teacher [at school 2], so it was...well...a little easier to work in class and such...

Interviewer: How was working in class better? Was there something the teacher did?

Nina: Yes..the teacher..we somehow...(breath)..weeee..(pause)..we somehow got to..eh..answer more in class so we would follow along...and if you didn't raise your hand for a while, the teacher called on you...then you feel like you have to follow along so you know the answer...it forces you to follow along...Yes!...I think that was really good

This teacher encouraged Nina by actively calling on her to participate in discussions. He seemed to be sensitive to her responses, thus asked for her attention when it was needed. By using the same method with other pupils, he provided Nina with discreet support that allowed her to perceive his attention without feeling singled out from her classmates. This also helped her develop a sense of belonging among her new classmates—as indicated by her use of the word “we” about experiences in the classroom. Recalling Schibbye's (2009) concept of mutual recognition, we can say that Nina's teacher showed understanding and acceptance of her needs and confirmed it by acting successfully to support her difficulties. His recognition resulted in supportive guidance in the classroom and emotional support in the teacher-pupil conference.

Practical recognition

This is a type of recognition in which a teacher may guide a student through new school routines resulting from a refuge stay. For example, Johan stayed twice at one refuge while continuing to

attend his regular school; the distance, however, made it difficult for him to use public transportation, so a taxi took him to school. When asked if his contact teacher knew about the refuge, he was uncertain and used phrases such as “I think so” or “I believe so.” The uncertainty could be interpreted from the fact that his teacher did not acknowledge his situation openly and verbally, but only implicitly by providing practical help, e.g., by waiting in her office to walk Johan to the taxi. Johan understood the practical help to mean that she knew and understood his changed situation; thus, we may call this practical recognition.

Practical help with the taxi was the teacher support Johan noticed most. He struggled to turn in homework on time and describes his teacher’s reaction:

Excerpt 3:

Interviewer: Did you sometimes not get your homework done?

Johan: Yes

Interviewer:...What did the teacher say?

Johan:Yeah...You have to do it for next time...

Interviewer: Does the teacher know about the refuge rules, that you have to go to bed early and sometimes you don’t have time...?

Johan: No

Interviewer: No...You haven’t told him or her?

Johan: (Shakes head for no)

Interviewer: Do you wish someone else had told the teacher about it?

Johan: No..it’s really fine.

The teacher’s response can be understood as an attempt to normalize Johan’s school experience by treating him like the other children. It indicates, again following Schibbye (2009), an embedded empathy and tolerance from the teacher, generated out of her knowledge of Johan’s situation. However, asking Johan to submit uncompleted homework the following day meant that his work piled up and may ultimately have increased his difficulties. Although the teacher’s response can also be interpreted as unspoken acceptance and tolerance demonstrated through practical assistance, it did not offer Johan any clear acceptance of his experiences. Based on Johan’s response, we understand that the teacher showed limited interest in understanding the cause of his struggles with homework and overlooked an opportunity to provide practical recognition of an academic kind, i.e., by offering extra help with homework. Moreover, Johan’s response of not wanting the teacher to know or make allowances for him can again be understood as a reaction to the teacher’s response, or as a possible indicator of feelings of shame, embarrassment, or secrecy (Dyregrov 2008; Sterne et al. 2010)—but it can also be interpreted as his way of preserving his pride and refusing to be a victim.

Third-party recognition

In cases of third-party recognition, children noticed acknowledgement of their situation and in some cases assistance from people at school who were not their teachers: the school nurse and the teaching assistant.

School nurse

Some teachers acknowledged a pupil’s situation by transferring the child to the school nurse, who in turn initiated conversations about his/her situation. Six children in this study met with a

school nurse during their refuge stays. The intensity of their meetings and the topics of conversation differed. The data do not show if the meetings followed a general school policy or if there was a process of formal referral to the nurse.

Dina's experience is an example of this kind of recognition. She met with a school nurse during two refuge stays. At the time of the interview, Dina (age 14) had been in Norway for almost a year. In contrast to her first refuge stay, Dina's mother had been able not to return to the abuser, since the family received financial support from the social welfare office. When asked if her teacher knew about her situation, she said:

Excerpt 4:

Dina: I think...he knew a little because they [the school] announced that I had to talk to the nurse...I think they...explained something to him, because he asked me if I had any problems with my stepfather. So I think he knew something

Interviewer:...did you feel that it was good that they knew something..?

Dina: I actually didn't like it, but I guess everyone knew about it. Anyway, it was to help me. Interviewer:...do you feel teachers are different in their approach?

Dina: The first teacher talked to me more, the other one helped me more. I think both of them were good.

Interviewer:...and the other?

Dina: Eh...

Interviewer: Did he talk to you about the whole situation?...

Dina:...he mostly helped me with school things, he didn't want to get into this thing [the home and refuge situation]

...

Interviewer:...would you have liked your teacher to talk about the situation at home..?

Dina: I don't know really...I don't think they [both teachers] went into it very much... they knew I was talking with another person [the school nurse] because of it [the situation].

Dina was unsure who knew about her situation and how much they knew. This apparently made her school experience less comfortable. What she surmised about her teacher's knowledge she deduced from two circumstances: first, being sent to speak to the school nurse, and second, her teacher's sudden question about whether she had problems with her stepfather. Even though Dina experienced the conversations with her teachers, and their assistance with schoolwork, as helpful, she also thought that neither teacher engaged very much with her home situation, either because they were unwilling to, or because they knew the nurse was taking care of her. According to Schibbye's (2009) model, Dina's teacher did not provide her with a listening ear that could have led to a dialogue acknowledging her situation. The only person who communicated clearly and directly with Dina about her situation was the school nurse, whom she saw only on odd occasions.

Teaching assistant

Kristin (age 13) had made two refuge stays. The child welfare office had followed her case from the beginning and communicated with both the school and the refuge. Kristin described herself as often sad at school, so she would not be surprised if others assumed something was wrong. Kristin's interviewer asked if she spoke to her teacher about why she was sad:

Excerpt 5:

Kristin: ...it was another teacher at the school that I talked to

Interviewer: What did you talk about?

Kristin: ...how I was doing and stuff

Interviewer: And...how things were at home or at school?

Kristin: Both

Interviewer: Do you feel like the teacher changed things at school...after you...talked...?

Kristin: ...not that I remember...It was...this teacher that I could trust and who understood...what I was going through

...

Kristin: ...it's just how it was...this teacher sort of...helped me...

Interviewer: Was it your contact teacher?

Kristin: No..it was not...

Interviewer: Was it another subject teacher?

Kristin: No..it was really just an assistant...someone who helped...the teacher

It is clear from the interview that the person Kristin trusted was the teaching assistant. Following Schibbye (2009), he was able to internally understand and meet Kristin with empathy: in Kristin's words, he "understood what I was going through." In addition to offering emotional support and understanding through conversation, the assistant was focused and present, giving Kristin additional attention in class. It is quite likely that he communicated the content of their conversations to the teacher. However, according to Kristin, the teacher did not approach her or make changes in the classroom to accommodate her needs during the time that she lived with her abuser or during her refuge stay.

Forced recognition

It was rare for children to inform their teacher themselves about their refuge stays. This was, however, what Peter and Sjur did. They both "forced" their stories on their teachers, with differing outcomes. Peter (age 11) moved in and out of one refuge five times. He was able to keep attending school during these stays. His first refuge stay took place when he was in pre-school and his last during the fifth grade. Peter's teacher allowed for dialogue about his situation and gave him sudden relief from the burden of carrying his secret, which he associated with carrying a heavy load of rocks: "...keeping everything inside..keeping it hidden..it's like having a pile of rocks on top of you. But when you tell someone..it's just like taking it all away."

Sjur (age 9) had a different experience. He was interviewed a year after his last refuge stay. He had made two refuge stays, both at the same refuge, since starting school. After his first refuge stay, in the third grade, he moved to a new home away from his father, but continued to have supervised visits from his father. In the fourth grade, the child welfare office determined that these visits represented a risk for Sjur and moved him with his mother and siblings to the refuge. He was able to go back to the same school during both refuge stays, but changed teachers. In the interview, he stated that he had first "...told the teacher [first teacher] that... that mom and dad quarreled."

Excerpt 7:

Interviewer: How's school?

Sjur: School's going well...the teacher said I had to concentrate a little more about doing things [classwork] and let my thoughts come at home...not at school..

Interviewer:...Does the teacher know things weren't so good at home...?

Sjur: Yes

Interviewer:...does the teacher know you lived...at the refuge?

Sjur: I don't know...

...

Interviewer:...are there still a lot of times that you have to try to control your thoughts...?

Sjur: Yes

Interviewer:...what do you think about when you let your thoughts wander wherever they want?

Sjur:...mostly I think about how they used to quarrel in the evenings

Sjur was aware of and open about his difficulty concentrating, which affected his schoolwork. He related this difficulty to the fact that he struggled with memories of his parents quarrelling. According to Dyregrov (2010), experiences of strong intrusive memories are among the most common post-traumatic reactions exhibited by teenagers and children. Following Schibbye (2009), recognition requires a genuine ability and willingness to give the other the right to their experiences. The teacher's response in the interaction described above is based on a subject-object rather than a subject-subject point of view. We see this in her response as reported by Sjur: "...the teacher said I had to concentrate more...let my thoughts come at home...not at school..." This shows the teacher's external view, which does not accommodate Sjur's inner experience of struggling with memories of his parents quarrelling. Consequently, the teacher treats Sjur as an object; and as an object he can be directed, using a corrective rather than an understanding manner. Regardless of the teacher's reasons (perhaps including lack of expertise or insecurity in her role), according to this model, her behavior can be seen to lack the self-reflexive attitude necessary to adopt Sjur's perspective and display empathy by understanding his inner state (his memories of parents quarreling) as the underlying reason for his difficulty concentrating.

Coincidental recognition

Coincidental recognition occurs unintentionally, in casual conversations between the child and the teacher. The teacher does not know the child's circumstances and the child does not intend to talk about it. An example is the experience David had at his second school. He had stayed at three different refuges and attended two schools in different cities over only a short period of time because of serious safety concerns.

Excerpt 8:

Interviewer: Did they [the teachers] talk to you about it [living at the shelter]?

David: No

Interviewer: No...then how do you know that they know [you live there]?

David: Because I told them

Interviewer: All of them?...

David: Yes...they wondered why I started here...so I told them that I had moved from another refuge to this one [in the same city as the school]

...

Interviewer: ...have they talked to you about it?

David: No

Reasons for the teachers' lack of knowledge might include poor communication between the refuge and the school or between the school's administration and its teachers; or the absence of a school crisis emergency plan for cases such as David's that required extra safety measures. Nonetheless, and contrary to the guidelines of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, even when David gave his teachers the opportunity to learn about his situation, they still chose to avoid talking to him about it. In Schibbye's (2009) model, the teachers' choice to react more spontaneously and their refusal to talk about David's circumstances as he released bits and pieces of information withdraws all opportunities to mutual recognition. Nevertheless, David's initiative to inform teachers at a new school be a response meant to make him feel safe. He may have felt that the more adults who knew, the safer he would be at school.

Discussion

This study shows that children with multiple refuge stays express the feeling of often not being listened to by their teachers. Only rarely do teachers acknowledge their refuge experiences by initiating a conversation. Previous research has suggested several reasons that teachers may feel reluctant to do so. They may wish to protect children from painful memories or protect themselves from the potential discomfort of listening to children's painful stories, or they may have feelings of incompetence or uncertainty about their role (Øverlien 2015; Alistic 2012). The present research did not examine school policies and practices for managing concerns regarding these children. However, earlier research shows that identifying and supporting children who had experienced traumatic events were left to the discretion of individual teachers (Dyregrov 2006).

The children in our study had several rather different understandings of and opinions about the obstacles to dialogue with their teachers. Some believed their teachers did not talk with them because of time constraints; some felt their teachers did not think their situation was important; and others perceived their teachers as unwilling to talk, or deciding not to because they knew the child was talking to other adults. A few children were frustrated by their teachers' reluctance to talk and courageous enough to demand that the teacher listen by forcing their story upon them. Following Schibbye's (2009) concept of mutual recognition, for a child to feel understood, it is crucial for the teacher to be present, by addressing the child's situation and providing the child opportunities to express him- or herself. It is essential; therefore, that a teacher is able to communicate without reservation or preconceptions, in order for the child to feel valued and cared for. In providing this atmosphere, the teacher moves from being an authority figure to a confidante for the child. Children who have experienced domestic violence learn very early on that it is a family secret, and usually do not attempt to share the secret with others. For many children, feelings of shame, self-blame, fear, and loyalty to their parents make them reluctant to share their experiences with friends or adults in their environment (Hester et al. 2007). Therefore, when teachers refrain from asking about children's situation and avoid acknowledging their circumstances, they reinforce the notion that domestic violence belongs to the private sphere and is not a topic the child should discuss with others. Children may also interpret such behavior to mean that the teacher is ambivalent or does not

care, and therefore learn to believe that it is important to maintain a perfect family façade, no matter how painful their life is underneath. According to Radford and Hester (2015), this may make children feel lonely, hopeless, and disempowered. Unless a child receives explicit permission from the teacher to open up and talk about her or his situation, it will be difficult for the child to overcome these negative feelings. Moreover, feeling that a teacher does not care or is not sensitive to their needs may affect not only children's experiences at school but also their beliefs about who they are and what they can do and come to determine many of their choices in adulthood. A study by Sunde and Raaheim (2009) conducted among Norwegian male workers with little formal education shows that individuals with negative teacher experiences are less likely to engage in continuing education as adults.

Extensive research on this topic confirms the notion that pupils who feel their teachers care about them and treat them with understanding, fairness, and friendship exhibit higher scholastic competence, academic self-efficacy, and enjoyment and increased self-esteem, school satisfaction, and wellbeing (Sakiz et al. 2012; Drugli 2012; Danielsen et al. 2009, 2010; Hamre and Pianta 2008; Reddy et al. 2003). A few pupils in this study, such as Nina, had sensitive, responsive, and positive interactions with their teachers. This type of formal recognition resulted in supportive guidance in the classroom and emotional support in the teacher-pupil conference. It impacted both educational performance and the feeling of social belonging in school. According to Malecki and Demaray 2003, this kind of emotional support from a teacher, which consists of feelings of trust and love, rather than instrumental, informational and appraisal support, is the most unique and strongest contributor to student social skills and academic competence. Hence, pupils who perceive their teacher as supportive become more academically motivated (Federici and Skaalvik 2013). Caring support from an educator may provide pupils with experiences that nurture motivational and learning-related processes important to both learning and academic functioning.

Listening means also being sensitive to behavior, body language, and all the things that go unsaid (Schibbye 2009). Johan's difficulties with homework and Sjur's inability to concentrate in class were met with little awareness or sensitivity from their teachers. As underlined by Raundalen and Schulz (2006) and Schibbye (2009), it is crucial that teachers show understanding and acceptance by adapting schoolwork to accommodate children's temporary needs and resources. For instance, children may be tired or have trouble concentrating at school owing to lack of sleep or having too much on their minds (Sterne et al. 2010). In a number of studies, pupils who had dropped out of school attributed this to domestic issues. They reported little if any accommodation from teachers, which contributed to feeling that school was a nightmare (Frederick and Goddard 2010), feeling invisible (Natland and Rasmussen 2012), or feeling they were not believed (Dyregrov 2008) or had a bad teacher (Sunde and Raaheim 2009). For these pupils, school became the only thing they could choose to drop when their life as a whole became too much to handle (Øverlien 2015; Natland and Rasmussen 2012). Although teachers are meant to provide recognition to children, paradoxically, research suggests that they receive little training or direction in how to manage concerns such as these. Teachers are not therapists; however, they should have basic skills that would allow them to feel confident working with children in difficult life circumstances (Alisic et al. 2012). According to Schibbye (2009), providing children with recognition of their experiences is not a method teachers acquire; rather, it is a question of being self-aware in their interactions with children.

Many of the children in this study noticed or believed that their teachers, somehow and at some point, knew about their situation and refuge stays, but did not talk about or react to it.

They indicated uncertainty and suspicion about their teachers' knowledge of their situation. Children were hesitant when asked whether teachers knew about their refuge stay. In response to these uncertainties, some found confirmation of their assumptions in forms of practical and third-

party recognition, while others informed their teachers themselves (forced and coincidental recognition). It is easy to understand that in such cases, children could doubt not only whether teachers were aware of their situation but also whether they would allow and be open to dialogue about it. These experiences exemplify how partners create, in their interaction, the mutual conditions for each other's reactions (Schibbye 2009). Not knowing where a teacher stands, in combination with limited access to a school nurse or counsellor (if there is one), is particularly serious: these children, especially, need contacts with stable, secure, and predictable adults who can offer structure and safety in their otherwise chaotic life situations. The limited contact with the school nurse is problematic too since, according to Øverlien (2012), the nurse and the nurse's office can represent a kind of safety zone for children living in difficult conditions.

Children experiencing domestic violence may struggle in class. They may have concentration difficulties related to posttraumatic stress, lack of sleep, having too much on their minds, or flashbacks to violence from their abusers (Øverlien 2015; Channugam and Teasley 2014; Schultz and Raundalen 2006). Failure of teachers to talk to pupils about their home situation indicates to pupils that their experiences of domestic violence are not considered a school issue. This is of great concern, since research has shown (e.g., Øverlien 2015; Schultz and Raundalen 2006) that domestic violence can seriously impede the learning process and optimal development, which may cause pupils to struggle at school both personally and socially as well as academically (Øverlien 2015; Koutselini and Valanidou 2014; Sterne et al. 2010; Frederick and Goddard 2010). In order for teachers to adequately accommodate the needs of their pupils, the domestic situation ought to be recognized as a school issue.

Concluding remarks

Recognition by teachers of children with multiple refuge stays and their experiences helps validate children and is an essential element in providing them with necessary support. Without teacher recognition, children may risk to be left to cope on their own during a critical life situation and must themselves assume the responsibility of informing teachers about their situation. We need more knowledge about school absence and the experiences of children living in refuges and clear school contingency plans for children in difficult life situations. This research also calls for continuous education that provide professional teacher with theoretical knowledge as well as practical training, and better education and training for undergraduate teachers and preschool teachers that encompasses their judicial, social, and pedagogical responsibilities, in addition to emphasizing and clarifying the important role they play as adult in the lives of children experiencing domestic violence and living in refuges.

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